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Reading Psalms as the Water Rises



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Biblical texts have been subjected to and sustained by rereading over the centuries. Changing social, cultural, and political contexts have invited readers to return to these texts with ever-changing circumstances. But are these texts, whose rereadings have formed the heart of Jewish theological discourse, elastic enough for the present environmental crisis?

On one level, that crisis underscores the devastating effects of modern modes of economic, political, and social organization for life on this planet, modes of organization that have depended on a carbon economy. “Carbon dioxide levels today are higher than at any point in at least the past 800,000 years,” writes Rebecca Lindsey on

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Climate.gov, adding that “carbon dioxide concentrations are rising mostly because of the fossil fuels that people are burning for energy.” The infrastructure we built to create our modern world can no longer be regarded with innocence or acquiescence.

But the climate disaster prompts us to interrogate not only the practical, material conditions of the industrial and postindustrial world; it also calls upon us to revisit the conceptual frameworks that render coherent these practical dimensions. Anthropogenic, or more specifically “capitalogenic” (caused-by-capitalism) climate disaster challenges the legibility of humans as uniquely endowed with the capacity and the task of tending to the created world, and of a model of creation as itself the result of the imposition of divine will on a formless chaos. In this moment, how can we engage meaningfully with the cosmologies and moralities of the Jewish textual tradition not merely as curiosities of an archaic past but rather as a living, if mythological, compass that orients us in and to our own time? What are the limits of our tradition’s textual sources?

STEWARDSHIP

Many Jewish thinkers and activists engaged with environmental issues draw on an ethic of stewardship they trace to biblical sources (especially Genesis 2:15). Nowadays proponents of this ethic speak about it in terms of a partnership between God and humans in the care of the earth. This partnership rests, however, on the unique status of the human in relation to the rest of creation. In this model, human beings relate to the nonhuman world as caretakers, fulfilling their purpose as humans by wisely stewarding the natural world and its resources. Righteousness results in the flourishing of the world; moral failure brings about a catastrophic flood. The natural world reflects human action. When the people of Israel are introduced into the Torah’s narrative, they become the exemplar *within* the human species, relating to the rest of humanity in analogous fashion to how humans relate to the rest of the world. The people of Israel, the stewards among stewards, sometimes fail to uphold their particular charge, and then the earth responds appropriately, affirming divine will by bringing devastation upon them. Contemporary interpreters working with a biblical model of stewardship conclude that humans need only rededicate themselves to the purpose of tending the earth.

Yet the stewardship model rests on a set of presuppositions that are increasingly difficult to maintain. The stewardship paradigm assumes the centrality of the people of Israel—and of the human species as a whole—in the created world and turning the rest of creation into either a backdrop for or a manifestation of human moral action. While environmental disaster is incontrovertibly attributable to human projects—in particular, capitalism, industrialization, and colonialism—

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translating these practices into the language of sin or understanding disaster as a manifestation of the failure of the people of Israel to adhere to the covenant is something else. We know the environment to be something greater than merely a

reflection of the sins of Israel. We also know that many human societies have lived sustainably alongside other species for thousands of years; it is therefore not *anthropos* as a whole but a particular subset of humans and human practices of industry that have brought about our present crisis.

I suggest, then, that the stewardship model of how humans fit into the broader created world—however ample the model’s support in biblical sources—is inadequate to this moment. In the Jewish textual tradition, resources for grounding an alternative model are not fully developed. But the Wisdom literature seems to offer a vision of the created order that is more coherent with our reality.

PSALMS OF CREATION

Some of the Psalms—I will focus on Psalms 104 and 148—are especially promising. Departing from the Tanakh’s emphasis on the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, these Psalms focus instead on the created world as a manifestation of divine will and wisdom. Indeed, these Psalms seem not only to decenter the story of Israel, but also to disrupt the triumphant positioning of human beings as the apex of the created order and celebrate the uniqueness of diverse animals, geologic formations, and weather events. In this vast but wisely ordered multiplicity, humans and their doings appear as just one more manifestation of divine creativity.

Consider the quotidian realities of the weather. Many of us find ourselves unable to assimilate how quickly conversations about “the weather” have shifted from casual to fraught. The language with which we might connect to the fluctuations of air and moisture around us proves elusive, however aware we might be of something deeply amiss in the patterns of seasons and weather. It turns out that this elusiveness is rooted in ancient dualisms. British anthropologist Tim Ingold writes:

The equation of materiality with the solid substance of the earth creates the impression that life goes on upon the outer surface of a world that has already congealed into its final form, rather than in the midst of a world of perpetual flux. Between mind and nature, persons and things, and agency and materiality, there is no conceptual space for those very real phenomena and transformations of the medium that generally go by the name of weather. This accounts for the virtual absence of weather from philosophical debates on these matters. It is a result of the logic of inversion — a logic that places occupation before habitation, movement across before movement through, surface before medium. In the terms of this logic, the weather is simply unthinkable.¹

We cannot grasp that disaster reveals itself in the weather if fluctuations of air and wind and precipitation have no substance in themselves and therefore no capacity to disclose reality.

Psalm 148, by contrast, offers a counterpoint to ingrained conceptual limitations and invites us to take seriously our own weather events. *Praise the Lord, O you who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths, fire and hail, snow and smoke, storm wind that executes God’s command* (verses 7-8). Here the praising of God is carried out not only by creatures but also by climatological phenomena—*fire and hail, snow and smoke and storm wind*.

Another facet of the natural world has remained elusive in modern Western imaginaries: the *interrelations* among the creatures and phenomena of the world. In the medieval Western world, the visual metaphor for the order of creation was that of the Great Chain of Being, an ordered creation running along a vertical axis between a zenith and a nadir. As the political hierarchies that supported the

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Great Chain of Being became less legible to us in non-monarchic societies, the industrializing West yielded a different model: the sharp distinction between nature (“wilderness” untouched by human hand) and culture. In this new era, wilderness became “the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness.”² This conceit buttressed a rapacious extractive economy that would claim more and more resources for the industrial world.

Psalm 104, by contrast, imagines interconnected species coexisting in symbiotic balance: *The trees of the Lord drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, His own planting, where birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the junipers. The high mountains are for wild goats; the crags are a refuge for rock-badgers* (verses 16-18). The Psalm testifies to an *ecological* imagination at work, observing trees drawing water for themselves and in so doing, benefiting the birds who make their homes in those trees. Each species’ place, needs, and activities are interlinked and mutually sustaining. This world is neither vertically arranged nor bifurcated but rather an ordered non-hierarchical web. Likewise, the humans who till the soil in this Psalm appear not as stewards but as one species living in harmony with others. Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, reflects on the dangers of being unable to imagine humanity integrated with their surroundings:

I gave the students in my General Ecology class a survey... Nearly every one of the two-hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix... I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day—brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl—truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision.³

Rather than placing humans outside of a pristine, untouched “nature,” the Psalmist sings praise for a world in which the human animal can be present without dominating the rest of creation.

Finally, if most biblical texts grant humans a singular capacity for willful agency, these Psalms speak of the animacy and responsiveness

of all creation. Psalm 148 calls upon them to praise God: *Praise Him, sun and moon, praise Him, all bright stars. Praise Him, highest heavens, and you waters that are above the heavens* (Ps. 148:3-4). Elsewhere, forests, hills, and other phenomena of the “natural world” dance and sing: *mountains skipped like rams, hills like sheep* (Ps. 114:4). The flood waters *have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring* (Ps. 93:3). The liveliness of the natural world breaks through in these moments; the nonhuman world is given agency, animation, and voice.

PSALMS REWRITE GENESIS

In reimagining the cosmos this way, the world in Psalms 104 and 148 parallels but also elaborates the first creation story. The creatures the Psalmist names recall the ordered moments of creation in Genesis 1: *wild and tamed beasts, creeping things and winged birds* (Ps. 148:10). As Jon D. Levenson shows in his classic study, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, the vocabulary of this Psalm echoes that of Genesis 1, but shifts the perspective. Genesis asserts creation as the story of the divine will imposed on, and creating order from, chaos. Psalm 104 does not narrate the “process of creation,” Levenson writes, but offers a “panorama of the natural world, conducted with a view to praising the creator for his superlative wisdom in conceiving and producing such an astonishing place.”⁴

Our perspective is shifted even further by Psalm 148, in which the Psalmist includes, in the call for praise, *sea monsters and ocean depths* [*taninim vekhol hatehomot*]. The phrase is striking insofar as the ocean depths are precisely what most biblical creation texts portray as being vanquished by God’s act of creating the world. Genesis 1, adapting the Babylonian creation epic known as Enuma Elish, portrays creation as a story of the divine conquest of chaos. Where Enuma Elish features the male storm god, Marduk, vanquishing the female-inflected watery depths, Tiamat, the Priestly account of creation in Genesis 1 presents the primeval watery chaos, *tehom*, subdued by divine speech. Allusions to this narrative appear throughout the Tanakh, including in other Psalms: *O God, my King from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land; it was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters*. Psalm 148, by contrast, imagines the watery depths (like the tremendous and terrifying *taninim*) praising God alongside, and in the same key, as the *wild and*

tamed beasts, creeping things and winged birds. The watery depths are not overpowered, as in Genesis 1, but instead are called upon to participate in praising God.

These Psalms offer us a facet of the biblical corpus too often eclipsed from view and move us away from seeing the human species as stewards or conquerors of the rest of creation. Yet turning to such Psalms of creation in this moment of ecological catastrophe is a temptation best resisted. However much these Psalms gesture toward a more ecological mindset, they cannot supplant the dominant narrative of creation. Psalm 148 calls upon the *tehomot* to praise God, but—like Genesis 1—still imagines the primordial world as a chaos in need of subjugation. It supports a “tehomophobic” outlook, in the words of Catherine Keller,⁵ according to which wild nature must be tamed—by industrial chemicals and clear-cutting, tools of the divinely appointed stewards, if not by divine fiat.

DIVINE ORDER & HUMAN DISORDER

This naming of the original world as *tehom* obscures our own belated post-industrial recognition that the world before us is a world composed of creatures with their own agency and their own intelligences. Whereas the Psalms proclaim that in the redeemed future, when God is crowned king by all nations, *the trees of the forest shout for joy* (Ps. 96:12), contemporary dendrologists gather ever more evidence for the complex systems of communication that trees evolved on their own.⁶ The watery depths preexisted us, and will return with the rising sea levels, but the oceans are complex, not chaotic. Moreover, civilization does not take place after the oceans have been reigned in; rather, human civilizations are tethered to and sustained by the seas. If we imagine agency and will (divine or human) only as the imposition of order on chaos, we fail to learn from the lively, intelligent world of the non-human.

We delude ourselves when we fail to name the gap between the world of divine order and the world of anthropogenic disorder. As we read these Psalms with a consciousness of our own present, we recognize more gaps between the world they describe and the world in which we live. In Psalm 104, we glimpse a harmonious world: all creatures have a home, and none has yet been displaced. *The lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God. When the sun rises, they come home and*

couch in their dens. The human then goes out to his work, to his labor until the evening. Even this brief mention of the food chain is free of gore; ferocious creatures seek their prey from God, rather than eyeing the stork whose home is in the junipers (verses 148:17, 21) for a meal. This is, in short, a world without the decay that nourishes new growth. It is a world without death.

But today, death and destruction are exactly what we confront as the world as we knew it unravels. The creation extolled by these Psalms is coming apart. The Psalmist assures us that *the waters stood above the mountains... you set bounds they must not pass so that they never again cover the earth* (Ps. 104: 6-9). But we should not assume that such divine sea level limits will save us this time; sea levels are rising and will soon submerge coasts and island nations. Even as we are drawn to the Psalms of creation for a reassuring model of our more-than-human world, we must keep our eyes on the rising tides lapping at our feet. ■

Notes

- 1 Tim Ingold, "Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought," *Ethnos* 71: 1 (2006), pp. 16-17.
- 2 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996), p. 7.
- 3 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), p. 6.
- 4 Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 57.
- 5 Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge, 2003).
- 6 Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (Knopf, 2020); Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*, vol. 1 (Greystone, 2016).

